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Richard Haass, Director of Office of Policy Planning

Q&A at Miraflores Palace

Caracas, 05/23/02

- Mr. Haass introduction:

I have just come out of a good meeting of two and a half hours with President Chavez. I have also had meetings with other people in Venezuela, with members of the opposition, members of the private sector, also the Vice-President and other individuals. I came here because the United States cares about Venezuela. The United States is also concerned about the political trajectory in this country, and we are committed to seeing democracy in this country succeed and thrive. We had conversations, myself with the President, as well as other meetings. Conversations about the internal situation in Venezuela, our bilateral relationship and certain regional issues. Again, I'll be happy to take a few of your questions, so. . .

Q: We would like to know whether you have spoken with the president about the existence of the [Osama] Bin Laden's people on Margarita Island?

A: We did not discuss that.

Q: There have been doubts and speculations that have appeared, especially here in Venezuela, on the position of the U.S. in relation to the events of last month. . .

A: There should be no doubts whatsoever about the U.S. and the events of mid-April. The U.S. had nothing to do with those events. The Secretary of State made it clear in the speech the other night at the OAS that the U.S. opposes 100% any political option outside the constitutional framework, i.e. working outside democracy.

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Q: In a recent interview with CBS, President Chavez said that it was up to the U.S. to explain its position in relation to last month's event.

A: I just explained our position. Again, the U.S. had nothing whatsoever to do with last April's events. Let me add one other thing if I may, for most of my time here has been spent talking about the future, not the past. It is impossible to come to Venezuela now and not to be impressed by the deep divisions within the country. We very much believe that it would be best for all the people in Venezuela if serious, genuine and meaningful national political dialogue would take place. I would hope both the government and the opposition would join in welcoming the support of outsiders, either the OAS, the UN or anyone else who was mutually acceptable.

Again, what we want to see is a peaceful democratic approach towards the political differences here so that this country can reverse its trend of economic decline. Thank you very much.

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